

[Harrington-Lueker on Groeneveld, 'Making Feminist Media: Third-Wave Magazines on the Cusp of the Digital Age'](#)

Discussion published by Jessie Frazier on Tuesday, January 8, 2019

The following book review from JHistory may be of interest to some H-Women list members.

Author:

Elizabeth Groeneveld

Reviewer:

Donna Harrington-Lueker

Elizabeth Groeneveld. *Making Feminist Media: Third-Wave Magazines on the Cusp of the Digital Age*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2015. 250 pp. \$36.99 (paper), ISBN 978-1-77112-120-0.

Reviewed by Donna Harrington-Lueker (Salve Regina University) **Published on** Jhistory (December, 2018) **Commissioned by** Robert A. Rabe

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In *Making Feminist Media*, Elizabeth Groeneveld explores the complicated terrain of third-wave feminist publishing—the pre-Twitter and Tumblr world of titles like *Bitch* (1996-), *Bust* (1993-), *Hues* (1992-99), *Venus Zine* (1994-2010), and *Rockrgrl* (1995-2005) that helped shape feminist discourse in the 1990s and early 2000s. Rooted in the D.I.Y. (do-it-yourself) culture of the girl zines of the early 1990s, each of these publications began life as zines themselves, and, as they grew, each confronted the challenges that politically radical or alternative publications face in a capitalist marketplace. Their negotiations with capitalism—Groeneveld rejects the term “co-optation”—are meticulously traced in this well-researched and impressively contextualized study.

Groeneveld, an assistant professor of women’s studies at Old Dominion University, advances her argument in two parts. Part 1, “Historicizing Third-Wave Magazines,” explores the early influence of *Sassy* magazine (1988-96), the groundbreaking, socially progressive teen magazine that covered fashion and beauty like other teen titles of the period but with a hefty measure of body positivity, female sexuality, and indie culture alongside. *Sassy*’s impact on third-wave publications was significant: some of the editors of the magazines that Groeneveld focuses on started their publishing careers at the teen magazine, and the first issues of many of these third-wave publications acknowledged the early *Sassy* as their inspiration. *Sassy*’s demise—largely at the hands of a conservative boycott of its content and a change in ownership—foregrounds the challenges feminist magazines face in the marketplace. A second chapter in this first section provides further historical context. Women’s suffrage publications of the nineteenth century dealt with the politics of a magazine’s name. (An attempt on the part of the prominent Beecher family to secure a name change for *The Revolution*, the radical suffrage publication edited by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B.

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Anthony, was rebuffed despite the family's offer of funding for the cash-strapped publication.) Faced with financial challenges of their own, later magazines sought solutions in the world of nonprofit publishing. In the late 1970s, for example, *Ms.* magazine sought financial stability in nonprofit educational status. But, as Groeneveld notes, that decision was not without its tradeoffs. Nonprofits were eligible for reduced postal costs and tax exemptions, and the designation gave a magazine a legitimacy that made it "appear unthreatening to potential advertisers" (p. 53). But that status also meant that as a nonprofit, *Ms.* could not engage in direct political activities, such as endorsing political candidates.

In part 2 of the study, "The Politics of Third-Wave Magazines," Groeneveld shifts the book's focus to a deeper analysis of specific titles, offering four case studies that explore the ways in which these publications shaped feminist discourse of the third wave on issues like race, fashion, domesticity, and sexuality. The first case study focuses on *HUES* magazine (Hear Us Emerging Sisters), which grew from a zine created in an introductory women's studies class at the University of Michigan to a glossy magazine with the likes of Rebecca Walker and Gloria Steinem on its board and a circulation in both the United States and Canada. Drawing on womanism and black feminist thought, *HUES* trained an intersectional lens on women's issues to decenter whiteness and explore instead the interlocking influences of gender, race, class, and sexuality on women's lives. For its co-founders, *HUES* was "a magazine that gave women of all cultures, shapes, sizes and lifestyles a chance to speak for themselves" (quoted, p. 79). That intersectional approach, though—that commitment to exploring women's experiences across race and cultures—ultimately was at odds with a magazine marketplace that saw uniform and easily identifiable niche markets as the path to profitability.

Other chapters in this section explore how third-wave publications negotiated feminism's often conflicted relationship with fashion and with their reappropriation of crafting and domesticity. In terms of fashion, Groeneveld charts *Bust* magazine's evolving consideration of fashion and its readers' not-always-sanguine responses to that coverage. Despite pushback from readers, the magazine's commitment to fashion increases during its most cash-strapped periods as it tries to attract more advertisers (p. 107). A renewed embrace of domesticity marks the magazines of the period as well. As Groeneveld points out, all of the third- and post-wave publications of this period reclaimed activities otherwise associated with the domestic sphere, from motherhood and sourdough to perfume-making and knitting circles. A final case study takes on female sexuality and the relationships between advertisers, magazines, and readers in its discussion of *Bitch* magazine's controversial sex toys advertisement.

Making Feminist Media's strengths are many. In terms of methodology, interviews with third-wave editors enrich the book's discussion of the political economy of feminist publishing, and close consideration of readers' letters from the magazines' archives provides glimpses of the complex interplay between the publications and their readers. Important, too, for those who study periodicals, the book raises questions about the nature of archives and of what gets preserved and what does not. *HUES*, for example, was published for nearly seven years, but issues of the publication are not part of the major archives of third-wave feminist periodicals, raising questions, Groeneveld argues, about the documentation of third-wave feminism and the inclusion of voices of women of color. Deeply sourced, the book layers discussions of archival materials with prominent voices in feminist theory and history, and a useful appendix documents the sometimes labyrinthine publication histories of the six publications in question. Most important, *Making Feminist Media* explores the limits of the

so-called wave metaphor typically used to describe the arc of feminist history—a metaphor, Groeneveld argues, that “often functions to obscure many similarities between second- and third-wave feminisms” (p. 11).

In “Sex, Lies, and Advertising,” published in 1990 after nearly a decade of trying to court advertisers for *Ms.* magazine, Gloria Steinem famously detailed the advertising industry’s resistance to a new vision for women’s magazines—its insistence on favorable coverage and congenial copy along with its reliance on harmful female stereotypes. *Making Feminist Media* brings that argument into the twenty-first century, providing those working in periodical studies and women’s studies with a compelling analysis of the intersections between feminism and commerce.

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